

RABINDRANATH TAGORE IN CHINA: SPIRITUALITY, CIVILISATION, AND THE MODERNIST DEBATE

Prosper Malangmei

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Maharaja Bodhchandra College (Affiliated to Manipur University), Imphal, Manipur and Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Regional Campus Manipur. Email: prospermalangmei@gmail.com, Mobile: 8860127835



ABSTRACT

In the early 20th century, China underwent a profound political and intellectual transformation. During this period, Rabindranath Tagore's 1924 visit became an epochal moment in Indo-Chinese cultural diplomacy. China was divided, with regional warlords vying for power after the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1912. The New Culture Movement emerged, calling for modernisation and scientific advancement, while nationalism and anti-imperialism fuelled resentment towards foreign powers. Invited by Liang Qichao, Tagore engaged with Chinese intellectuals during an ideological discourse between traditionalism and modernism. His lectures on spiritual unity, drawing from spiritual teaching, advocated for a civilisation based on moral and artistic values instead of material progress. Tagore's vision, however, encountered strong resistance from leading Chinese intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu and Lu Xun, who censured Tagore's promotion of spirituality as an impediment to a scientific temperament and national sovereignty. The scholarly discussion surrounding his tour brings forth conflict between spiritual traditions and modernist ambitions, raising questions about the role of religion, tradition, and cultural heritage in a rapidly changing world. Despite the criticism, Tagore's engagement in China contributed to a discussion on civilisation and modernity, offering an alternative to Western materialism.

Keywords: China, Civilisation, Cultural Diplomacy, Modernism, Rabindranath Tagore.

Introduction

In 1912, the Qing Dynasty in China collapsed, resulting in the fracturing of Chinese society and ideological contestation. Thus, China in the early twentieth century was preoccupied with political turmoil and upheaval, as it lacked a central authority. The fall of the Qing Dynasty created a power vacuum, which led to the era of the warlords. Warlords fought for dominance in their region. During this period, Chinese intellectuals started the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement. It promoted critical thinking, scientific temper, cultural introspection and national sovereignty. In this political context, Rabindranath Tagore's 1924 tour ignited intellectual debates in China. Tagore was invited by Liang Qichao to deliver a lecture at the initiative of the Beijing Lecture Association (*Jiang Xue She*). In his introductory remarks, Liang described India and China as twin brothers, pre-modern civilisations sharing a deep spiritual kinship long before the rise of the West (China Daily, 2008).

The existing literature on Tagore's visit to China focuses on the antagonism that he faced. Relatively little attention has been given to the epistemological challenge his ideas posed to prevailing modernist discourses in China. This paper aims to reassess Tagore's 1924 tour from the perspective of civilisational dialogue and ideological contestation. It argues that Tagore's critique of materialist modernity, while dismissed by contemporary Chinese reformers, yet Tagore propounded an alternative paradigm of development. This paradigm sought to harmonise technological and institutional advancement with ethical consciousness and spiritual depth. In doing so, Tagore illuminated the potential of religious and philosophical traditions as mediators of transnational knowledge transfer and agents in shaping pluralistic visions of modernity in twentieth-century Asia.

Historical and Intellectual Context

The Xinhai Revolution of 1911 dethroned over two millennia of imperial rule in China. This revolution marks the beginning of a period of political instability and ideological transition. The revolution hoped to establish a democratic government by replacing imperial rule, but it divided the Chinese state. Following the Xinhai Revolution, the Republic of China (ROC) emerged, establishing a democratic government. However, it failed to unify the Chinese state under a single administration. During this period of political upheaval, Yuan Shikai's brief consolidation of power and his ill-fated self-coronation as emperor in 1916 led to a political vacuum following his death, resulting in a protracted era of warlordism. While the Beiyang government in Beijing, which was internationally recognised, did not exercise real power, the regional warlords retained power in their areas. This prevented any prospects for national integration and unity in China.

The political disarray prompted a critical rethinking of China's cultural and intellectual foundations, giving rise to the influential movements in modern Chinese history, i.e., the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement. The movement originated in the 1910s and reached its climax by the early 1920s. These movements initiated a critique of traditional Confucian epistemologies and mooted a debate on the overhaul and redefinition of national identity. The movements suggest that remedies for cultural ailments include science and democracy (Dai, 2024). Beyond the cultural awakening, the movements represented a concerted effort to dismantle deeply entrenched feudal ideologies and replace them with rationalist, secular, and individualist paradigms (Ropp, 1980).

The discourse and dissemination of modernist ideas were transmitted through the New Youth Journal (*Xin Qingnian*). The journal was founded by Chen Duxiu, an intellectual and reformer, and it became a medium for discussions on cultural reform. The journal received contributions from leading Chinese intellectuals, including Hu Shih, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, and Cai Yuanpei, who advocated for societal reforms, like the promotion of vernacular literature (*baihua*), women's emancipation, and the reevaluation of Confucian conservatism. These thinkers and reformers were influenced by Western education, which viewed spiritualism and religious doctrine with disdain. They pinned their trust on empirical knowledge and civic reform. Chen Duxiu refers to science and democracy as 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy' as saviours of Chinese civilisation who could save China from disintegration.

During this tumultuous period, China was diplomatically humiliated in 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference when German concessions in Shandong were awarded to Japan. This infuriated the Chinese masses, reinvigorated nationalism, and questioned cultural infirmity. Due to this, the May Fourth Movement of 1919 emerged, providing intellectual ferment with a mass political expression. The Chinese demanded for strong China and expected equality in state-to-state relations. Students and intellectuals rallied nationwide in protest and successfully coerced the Chinese delegation to withhold endorsement of the Treaty of Versailles. Wang Hui (2013) professes that it represented a form of thought warfare, redefining the role of culture in revolutionary transformation.

Despite the revolutionary enthusiasm that characterised the New Culture Movement and May Fourth Movement, they were far from ideologically monolithic. While dominant voices within the movement called for the wholesale abandonment of tradition, others, like Liang Qichao, argued for a more syncretic approach. This ideological heterogeneity reveals conflict within

China's modernist path, concerning the role of religion, spiritual heritage, and civilisational memory in developing the national future. The radical enlightenment ideals of the May Fourth generation would later come into conflict with emerging authoritarian narratives, narrowing the intellectual pluralism that the New Culture Movement initially encouraged (Ruoshui, 2003).

Rabindranath Tagore's 1924 visit to China occurred in this volatile and ideologically polarised environment. His espousing spiritual humanism and civilisational dialogue, while predicated on a prevailing Indo-Chinese tradition of Buddhist and philosophical exchange, was met with considerable resistance from Chinese intellectuals who regarded Tagore's ideas as anachronistic. For thinkers like Chen Duxiu and Lu Xun, Tagore's preaching on spirituality and moral cultivation clashed with the utilitarian ethos of national salvation through science, democracy, and material strength. The May Fourth intellectuals had come to consider cultural heritage as a primary impediment to China's modernisation (Lai, 2009).

Tagore's Civilisational Philosophy and Pan-Asianism

In the early twentieth century, Rabindranath Tagore saw the upsurge of Western industrial development and nationalism. Tagore developed a counter-narrative to Western modernism by advancing civilisational philosophy as a critical response to Western modernity and rising ethnonationalist ideologies. Through his literary writings, philosophical essays, and diplomatic engagements, Tagore projected a vision of spiritual cosmopolitanism grounded in the Indic metaphysical traditions, like the Vedanta and aesthetic humanism. Tagore's foresight aims to provide an alternative to the militarised materialism of the Western world, which would prevent Asia from being relegated to a geopolitical bloc, leading to contestation. Tagore critiques the epistemic arguments of Western modernity, which prioritised instrumental rationality, mechanistic progress, and nationalism.

Tagore, in his seminal work *Nationalism* (1917), denounced Western development, terming it a soul-destroying machinery of commercial civilisation, on the basis that Western modernity's propensity for economic expansion, scientific conquest, and statecraft degrades human beings. Tagore believed that advancement based on materialism dehumanised societies, lacked morality, and subverted ethical life. The commercialised and industrialised state reduces individuals to functional units within a profit-driven system. In such a country, spiritual reflection and cultural richness become inconsequential. In contrast to the Western development prototype, Tagore proposed the principle of creative unity, a civilizational model that engages in dialogue and spiritual solidarity among diverse cultures. Tagore has the perspective that civilisations should not engage in rivalry for supremacy. It should take the path of mutual ethical exchange to build universal humans with moral values.

This civilisational principle was further elaborated in *The Religion of Man* (1931), where Tagore warned against the idolatry of nationalism and the coercive force of the modern state. He contended that civilisations corrupt when cultural and moral vitality is subsumed under authoritarian structures or nationalist fervour. According to Tagore, the state must foster inner sovereignty and spiritual autonomy because a war economy, technocratic education, and environmental degradation drive the world. Accordingly, a person has to live a life of aesthetic sensibility, ethical living, and harmonious coexistence with nature. Tagore rejects automated learning due to its utilitarian purpose rather than opposing modern pedagogy. Tagore considered modern education to promote rote learning over imaginative, critical analysis, and

moral development, which produces submissive individuals instead of critical thinkers and empathetic persons.

To promote his vision of education, Tagore established Visva-Bharati University in 1921, representing an institutional response to the spiritual and intellectual crisis of modernity. Envisioned as a *visva-vidyalaya* (world university), the institution's objective is to remove the hierarchical binaries between East and West. The university aims to create a dialogical space where Asian spiritual traditions would engage meaningfully with Western critical methods. Tagore envisioned Santiniketan (the university) as a civilizational experiment, a beacon of Asian universalism (Bose, 2009). Tagore's university strives to nurture cross-cultural scholarship, intellectual plurality, and ethical education, free from colonial imperatives.

Tagore travelled extensively worldwide, including within Asia, and engaged in intellectual discussions and debates that inspired him to formulate Pan-Asianism. Japanese art critic Okakura Kakuzo, author of *The Ideals of the East*, captivated Tagore. Okakura's assertion that 'Asia is one' influenced Tagore's understanding of Asian unity as a shared civilisational consciousness rather than a political alliance. In contrast to militarised versions of Pan-Asianism that later emerged. Tagore's conception was explicitly non-hegemonic. He envisioned a cultural and spiritual communion rooted in Asia's philosophical traditions, such as Buddhism, Vedanta, and classical aesthetics, as a counter-hegemonic intervention against Western imperialism and its replication in Eastern militarism (Hanneman, 2019).

Tagore's disillusionment with nationalism stems from his conviction that a nation, constructed through territorial sovereignty and political autonomy, becomes morally empty. Therefore, Tagore recommended a form of cosmopolitan nationalism, spiritual in substance and universal in orientation, which describes the state as a place of moral development (Mukherjee, 2020). Nationalism is a coercive force that instrumentalises human beings, erodes moral consciousness, and promotes exclusionary politics for Tagore.

Debates and Controversies

Tagore's tour to China lasted forty-nine days, from April 12 to May 30 in 1924, culminating in intense ideological contestation and exposing deep divergences in the conceptual understanding of modernity, civilisation, and cultural renewal. Initially, the tour spurred a dialogue between two ancient civilisations. Still, in the later course of the lecture, it turned into a confrontation between Tagore's vision of spiritual cosmopolitanism and the Chinese intellectual elite's revolutionary pragmatism. Initially, Tagore was enthusiastically received, but later, the reception was marred by widespread student protests and intellectual backlash. It compelled Tagore to shorten his tour. This suggests that historical context has a significant role in accepting Tagore's ideas. It was not only a matter of philosophical disagreement. Tagore's message of ethical universalism and civilisational introspection failed to resonate in a China reeling under national crisis and committed to scientific modernity and political reconstruction (Das, 1993).

Tagore's argument on spiritual awakening, inner sovereignty, and cultural introspection appeared increasingly out of step with China's need for national consolidation, scientific advancement, and political sovereignty. The Chinese intellectual cohort was dominated by revolutionary materialism and post-May Fourth iconoclasm; Tagore's lecture on civilisational harmony and metaphysical renewal collided head-on with Chinese intellectual reformers. The

Chinese elite interpreted it as politically naive and untimely; also, Tagore was a scholar who lacked political experience. Yao and Wang (2022) view this clash as a disjuncture, where Tagore's call for former civilizational values was incompatible with China's future-oriented revolutionary approach.

Chen Duxiu became a vehement critic of Tagore, a prominent personality in both the New Culture and May Fourth Movements. Chen adored Tagore and translated *Gitanjali*, Tagore's work, into Chinese, but eventually rejected Tagore's worldview as unsuitable in China's political context. He criticised Tagore's spiritual universalism as a misguided distraction from the material conditions of Chinese society, warning that it would mislead Eastern nations into passive contemplation rather than revolutionary force on the path of development (Lee, 2013). According to Chen, cultural renewal must be modernised through rationality, science, and democratic reform, rather than via abstract, metaphysical introspection. Chen's modernist critique equated culture with political instrumentality, arguing that aesthetic or spiritual projects must serve the nation's practical transformation; otherwise, they are redundant (Hui, 2013). Although Tagore's idealism resonated with the masses, it failed to provide the strategic clarity needed at that time of existential national crisis in China.

Apart from Chen Duxiu, Tagore also received critical reviews from literary luminaries such as Lu Xun. Although Lu Xun refrained from direct denunciation, his satirical essays and literary allusions impart scepticism toward Tagore's reception in China. In his 1933 essay *Wanton Condemnation and Superlative Eulogy*, Lu Xun mocked the reverence with which Chinese liberals welcomed Tagore, elevating him to a fantastical figure and a living fairy, which was a detachment from the material realities of China's suffering (Liming, 2010). Lu Xun believed that the danger lies in Tagore's poetic mysticism, which could sway the minds of Chinese youth from the imperatives of political awareness and societal realities. Lu Xun was the architect of modern Chinese literature and held the perspective that literature serves as a conduit for historical consciousness and social critique; therefore, spiritualism is inconsistent with China's urgent need for political development.

The Chinese intellectuals' community's remonstrance towards Tagore is a discordance between two approaches to modernity. Tagore envisages a postcolonial Asia built on cultural dialogue, morality, and spiritual cosmopolitanism. At the same time, Chinese intellectuals, who witnessed and experienced the trauma of imperialism and internal division, espouse opposite principles of scientific rationalism and national mobilisation to achieve Chinese growth. Eminent Marxist thinkers like Chen Duxiu and Qu Qiubai had equated Tagore's philosophy with spiritual opium, having the potential to blind the youth to the political reality. Tagore's ideals were a regressive force for the Chinese elite, potentially dampening revolutionary consciousness and delaying the political expediency of anti-colonial liberation. Among the various intellectuals, figures such as Liang Qichao and the poet Xu Zhimo expressed admiration for Tagore's poetic humanism. Albeit the dominant intellectual ambience adopted a hostile stance towards Tagore. The majority of elites hold the standpoint that Tagore's anti-nationalist and pacifist views are politically ill-suited and ideologically backwards. Tagore's lecture on aesthetic rapprochement, ethical universality, and spiritual freedom had few audience members in a milieu where the primary concerns were sovereignty, industrial modernisation, and anti-imperialist solidarity (Mishra, 2022).

Tagore's Legacy and Its Contemporary Relevance

Tagore's assessment of Western materialism and nationalist modernism has since gained retrospective currency following his controversial visit to China. He offered another model of development based on spiritualism. Tagore has a philosophical counterpoint to China's dominant debates of utilitarian modernisation, prompting later intellectuals like Liang Shuming and Hu Shi to reconsider the importance of Confucian traditions within a modern setting (Zhang & Hebert, 2023).

Tagore was one of the early critics of Eurocentric developmentalism. He criticised the West in order to restore the spiritual and moral dimensions of progress. His invocation of shared Buddhist and scholarly traditions, such as references to Nalanda and the pilgrimages of Xuanzang, was strategic apart from historical, with the intention of reactivating an ethical common ground for future Sino-Indian relations (Zu, 2022). Although his civilisational appeals were dismissed by many of his Chinese contemporaries, particularly those inclined towards the scientific and political imperatives of the May Fourth generation. Tagore's vision found later resonance in China's evolving cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies during the mid-twentieth century. Tagore's moral development, cultural reciprocity, and spiritual sovereignty illuminated the post-revolutionary search for a distinctly Asian type of international relations.

Tagore's ideas have regained intellectual prominence in recent times, especially in the context of China's peaceful development and its desire to present a distinct civilizational identity from Western liberalism. His commentary on material progress sans ethical responsibility reverberates in contemporary Chinese discourses on ecological civilisation, a term that has entered state policy jargon since the early 2000s (Shen, 2018). Tagore's favour for integrative modernity, which synthesises scientific rationality with spiritual wisdom, offers critical insights into China's ongoing efforts to balance development with environmental sustainability and cultural continuity. Tagore's concept of *visva-sahitya* (universal literature) further anticipates emerging postcolonial approaches to world literature that stress intercultural empathy and ethical universality (Fraser, 2015).

A consequence of Tagore's visit was the foundation of Cheena Bhavana at Visva-Bharati University, established in partnership with the Chinese scholar Tan Yun Shan. This institution became a mainstay for the study of the Chinese language, literature, and civilisation in India, incubating cross-cultural academic exchange that has continued for generations. The Visva-Bharati acknowledges the yearning behind Tagore's 1924 mission, identifying an eagerness for cultural collaboration despite ideological friction. Although the immediate impact of the visit was muted by political antagonism, Tagore's legacy continues to echo in contemporary debates on civilizational diplomacy and Asian modernities.

Tagore's ideals have found relevance in China's Confucian revivalism and its soft power initiatives, which emphasise harmony, cultural plurality, and multipolar internationalism. Tagore has preached about ethical universalism, which champions spiritual freedom and cultural self-respect, now merging with China's articulation of a development approach that attempts to avoid the ideological division between Western liberalism and the Chinese development model. Tagore's caution against the danger of adopting the Western model without critically analysing it finds pertinence as modern China contemplates the philosophical foundations of national development. Thus, Tagore's censure of nationalism as a divisive force

is now applicable to China's balancing act between asserting cultural pride and avoiding chauvinistic nationalism (Chakravarti, 2024).

Additionally, Tagore's pan-Asian prescience advocates for ethical unity rather than geopolitical consolidation, which continues to provide valuable perspective into the regional cooperation structure. For example, India and China signed the *Panchsheel* agreement (Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence) in 1954. Tagore's dismissal of hegemonic nationalism is an endorsement of cultural fellowship in Asian solidarity, prioritising a shared civilizational heritage over strategic alliance-building. The cultural aspects of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) denote this orientation, revealing Tagore's commitment to mutual enrichment rather than domination. Tagore sought to establish cultural bridges that would provide a normative structure for interpreting China's international engagement in regions where historical sensitivities complicate bilateral relations (Tsui, 2011).

It is evident that Tagore's 1924 visit to China prodded ideological tension, sparking a civilizational debate that transcended its historical context. His spiritual humanism and ethical cosmopolitanism, once repudiated as mismatch, have now become critical resources for reimagining development, diplomacy, and intercultural understanding in the twenty-first century. Tagore's civilizational philosophy was never constrained by temporal or territorial limits; its relevance lies in its calibre to take a stand on morality in the uncertain modernity. In an era where environmental degradation, ideological polarisation, and the resurgence of civilisational rhetoric are in vogue, Tagore's call for a spiritualism and ethically correct modernity remains logical and imperative (Sen, 2011).

Conclusion

Tagore's heritage in China is beyond the momentous occasion of his 1924 visit, pointing to a deeper philosophical observation. Tagore reimagines Asia in line with ethical awareness and cultural solidarity by discarding power politics and blind copying of the Western model. The contemporary world order is going through polarisation, environmental problems, and rigid ideologies. As an antidote to the world's issues, Tagore's viewpoint on civilizational dialogue, characterised by empathy and humility, has become prudent. In Tagore's world, there has to be harmonisation of scientific progress with morality, without which it would spiral into destruction. Tagore's thoughts have inspired Asia to embrace indigenous knowledge without succumbing to sectarianism. His views on nationalism and unrestricted technocracy are pertinent today. Tagore had the conviction that Asia is capable of developing itself due to centuries of pluralistic traditions and a commitment to humanism.

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